

The Last Lesson Plan: On Losing a Teacher

WHAT LESSON PLAN would you want written in your memory by your school community?

That question was framed for me in the most recent of many losses of a school community member across my career. If you work as an educator, eventually you will lose a colleague or a student. Sometimes that loss comes unexpectedly. Sometimes it's drawn out through the agony of time. In either case, the loss represents tragedy.

Earlier this year, I talked with our leadership team about the recent loss of a younger-generation music educator, Eric. He was killed in a car accident just before Thanksgiving. I asked

two novice principals affected by this teacher's loss to share what they had learned about leading as they supported their communities to process this loss.

The high school principal reported upon returning from the holiday break how vital it was to open the music room for students and staff to drop in and talk with one another. "More than anything else, we simply needed each other," the principal said. "The teachers came to the room with our students almost like it was the home where everyone gathers after the loss of a family member."

He described the quiet conversations of sharing that occasionally

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shifted to notes from the piano or voices lifting in song, capturing the spirit and spirituality of Eric, a remembrance that allowed their common grief and railing at his loss to turn to celebration of his uncommon joy in being a member of two of our school communities.

The principal of the middle school, where this music teacher also taught, commented simply that she had learned as she phoned every single staff member how important it was for them to hear her voice as a personal medium for sharing Eric's loss individually. They needed the timbre of her real voice — not an e-mail or a voice message.

Tribal Leadership

As these two principals spoke, I was reminded of a similar time as a young principal when my own school community lost a novice kindergarten teacher. More than anything in my career, the act of leading a school community through that loss, and subsequently many others, taught me that principals are ultimately tribal leaders, sought out for their voices, care, guidance and skill in bringing together a community. They are positioned to help make sense of the senseless and to respond to the needs of the community as a whole and as individuals.

Death is a test of our school communities. It halts time. It presses us to remember that we are a gathering of people who feel loss communally —

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even when we didn't know a person as well as another student or staff member did. Death teaches us that learning is truly about life and not about passing tests. It reminds us that what people take away from those we memorialize in our stories, eulogies and music is emotional in tenor and social in context.

As tears flow, we push aside our hurried lives of covering content to connect with each other. We are reminded that what we think is the most important work we do may actually be the least important. That's why in my school district as we build our school communities for learners and learning, we prioritize building relationships first before we focus on creating relevance and rigor in the work our young people accomplish.

Personal Touches

Relationships are foundational to all we do as educators. At a memorial service a week after Eric's death, his students described why he made a difference in their lives, first as a caring adult and then as a music teacher. Who he was as a person mattered the most to them as they turned memories into narratives about their teacher. A sampling of tributes:

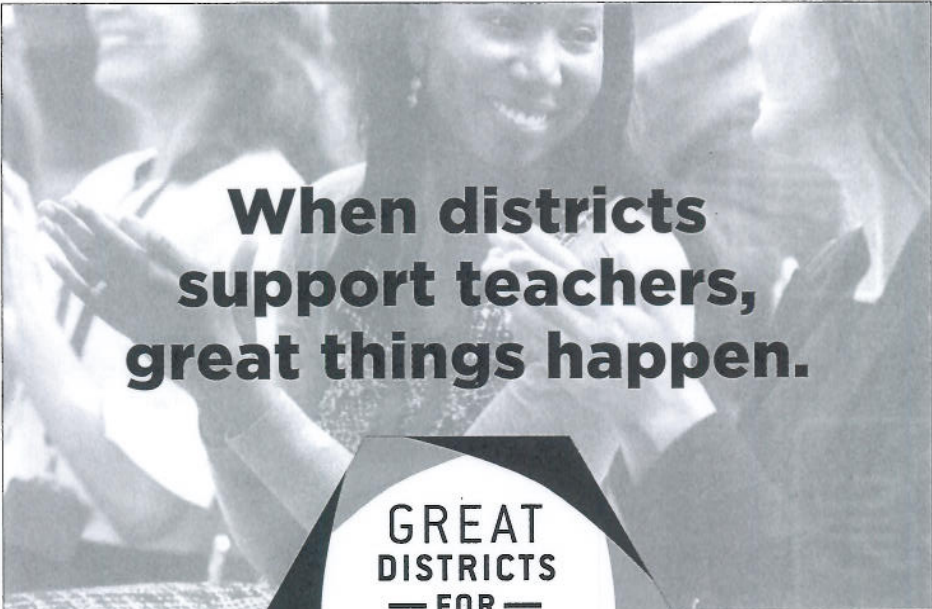
- ▶ "He would make waffles for our class at the end of the semester and when he found out I was gluten-free he made special waffles for me."
- ▶ "He always said hello in the hallways. If he knew you, he wouldn't just greet you by your first name. He always used your first and last name."
- ▶ "He was surprised that, despite my outgoing personality, I was terrified to sing on stage. He worked with me to overcome that. Just before he died, I tried out for a solo and even though I knew I wouldn't get it, I like that he got to see me do that."

At the winter concert and service planned and conducted by his young

musicians and community peers, we participated in a well-designed lesson plan crafted carefully and purposefully by Eric. He wasn't physically on stage for his last concert, but he was there in spirit, and everyone had one more chance to

participate in learning from and with Eric.

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